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Arguing for a conscious emergence of language

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Abstract

In the present article it is argued that the first instances of linguistic communication between early humans were characterised by the use of consciously invented signs. This position is in contrast with what is probably the mainstream view on the subject, which holds that language is the result of a biologically acquired communicative ability that spontaneously, instinctively, began to manifest itself in the mouths or hands of the very first language users. By highlighting the inextricable link existing between linguistic production and conscious thought, I claim that the first true linguistic items that appeared on the evolutionary scene could never have been generated had a higher level of consciousness not come to characterise the human mind, enabling it to perform 'thinking about thinking'. Key to this novel mental capacity was the acquisition of a new type of representational system accessible to conscious awareness. The view of language emergence suggested here inevitably clashes against some important theories about language and its evolution. By placing conscious meaning right at its core, it rejects, for example, syntactocentric approaches to language. It also distances itself from accounts of language evolution which predict linguistic forms to have arisen before linguistic meanings.

Keywords: Language evolution; Consciousness; Conceptual thinking

1. Introduction: outlining the main points of the discussion

How exactly did our ancestors begin to speak or sign languages? It is an old, unresolved question. Numerous suggestions have been put forward, but almost every aspect of language evolution is still the object of heated debates and controversies. One of such controversies is whether the first languages were the product of conscious inventions or, by contrast, they emerged and developed naturally through a process over which people had little or no control. The present work is going to defend the first of these two contrasting positions, claiming that linguistic inventions became possible when hominins acquired the ability to think about their own thoughts. Here below is a brief description of how the article is structured:

Section 2 introduces the concept of 'thinking about thinking', which is of central importance to the argument developed in the present article. It also presents two conflicting views about the possible involvement of conscious will in the birth of language: the position of those who believe language to be a human cultural artefact is contrasted against that of those who regard it as a product of human biology.

Section 3 evaluates the allegedly spontaneous appearance and development of a sign language among a community of deaf individuals in Nicaragua. This is usually considered to be one of the most convincing pieces of evidence in support

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of the instinctive, unconscious emergence of language. I will argue that what has been found about that phenomenon does not actually undermine the hypothesis that the first human languages were the product of conscious inventions.

Section 4 is where I lay out my arguments in favour of the view that languages were deliberately created and constructed. The section begins by presenting and criticising one of the very few available descriptions of how languages may have come to light spontaneously. The objections I make to that picture lead the discussion straight to the core argument of my thesis, which highlights the intimate relationship existing between language production and conscious thinking.

Section 5 deals with the issue of what kind of mind hominins must first have developed in order to start thinking consciously and invent languages. In this sense, I will look at Jean Mandler's theory of the human mind (perhaps best outlined in her 2004 *The Foundations of Mind*) as a useful conceptual framework within which the idea of language as a conscious invention can be accommodated.

Section 6 seeks to present that idea in relation to a possible evolutionary timeline for language. While suggesting that the appearance of conscious thought (the trigger of linguistic inventions) was the result of a late saltation event, I also stress the equally fundamental role that some other previous physical and mental transformations must have played in paving the way for the later emergence of language.

The final discussion in section 7 contains some conclusive remarks on the significance and implications of the picture proposed in the present article. I will argue that it necessarily denies validity to some influential theories of language and its evolution. In particular, it strongly refutes syntactocentric views of language as well as theories of language evolution that predict linguistic forms to have appeared before linguistic meanings.

2. Two opposing views on language emergence

Humans have metacognitive capacities: they are capable of what some call *thinking about thinking*, the ability to be sometimes aware of, detached from, in control of the thoughts that surface into consciousness. Thinking about thinking (henceforth also referred to as *conscious thinking*) is in essence what Edelman (1989) calls *secondary consciousness* and Bickerton (1995:58) calls *consciousness-2*, whereby the organism becomes aware of being conscious and can think about her own thoughts. It is a level of consciousness that Edelman and other scholars (e.g., Clark, 2006:372) believe to be uniquely human and quite distinct from *primary consciousness* (or *consciousness-1*). The latter is said to characterise the mental life of infants and animals, and involves consciousness about perceptions and sensations. Animals can react to such perceptions appropriately through instinctive behaviours, but cannot reflect upon them. An animal possessing primary consciousness ''has no means of reviewing explicitly its present perceptions in terms of analogues in the past or in terms of anticipated analogues projected to the future...and is not conscious of being conscious'' (Edelman, 1989:186). In secondary consciousness, though, ''we do not only see the rabbit; we know we are seeing the rabbit'' (Bickerton, 1995:129). Conscious thinking is often put in connection with many *executive functions* of working memory (Baars and Franklin, 2003), which are believed to carry out operations such as attention, reasoning, planning, decision making, active inhibition, sequencing, temporal tagging, etc. (Baddeley and Logie, 1999; Miyake and Shah, 1999). Indeed, although in the last several years a series of experimental studies appear to have found the seeds of human metacognition in some non-human animals (e.g., Smith et al., 1995; Shields et al., 1997; Hampton et al., 2004; Kornell et al., 2007; Rosati and Santos, 2016),[1] many of the above executive operations probably remain beyond the reach of most if not all non-human species. In contrast, we routinely use them to carry out a plethora of tasks, often without experiencing any particular mental effort.

In relation to the aims of the present article, even a simple activity such as deliberately inventing a novel linguistic label for some concept probably requires the aid of conscious thinking. For any new thing, event, situation we come across, or for any imaginary, non-existing entity we have constructed in our mind, we can, if we wish, invent a label for it, whereby we are free to come up with any arbitrary gestural or vocal sign we like: we may behold for some time a label that has sprung to mind, perhaps evaluating it against and choosing it from possible alternative labels. Eventually, we can make the voluntary decision to adopt it in the future and even propose its use to some of our friends.

Of course, we never practise this kind of inventive activity: since the very first years of our life we have found ourselves provided with a vast repertoire of shared, conventional signs that cover all of our needs. It is the language used in our community, which we acquire in the first years of our existence, largely without any effort. Nevertheless, when one tries to give an account of how language came about, it is very easy to point out that the very first linguistic creatures did not have any model to learn from (Hurford, 2012:638). It is one of the reasons that have led some to believe that the 'invention hypothesis' should be given serious consideration in order to explain how things got started, irrespective of which

[1] But see Carruthers (2008) on the interpretation of the data gathered in some of those studies. He maintains that the behaviours displayed by the tested animals can be explained in terms of first-order rather than second-order cognitive processes.